

## A YEAR AFTER...

I always envied Zsuzsa for a single, professional reason: she started her career in the late 1980s. She witnessed the final phase of perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Gaidar reforms and had the opportunity to closely follow the process of disintegration and the establishment of the new Post-Soviet entities. After three decades of Soviet “zastoi”, Russian time became “thick” with new developments in those years. This was an unrepeatable series of events, providing invaluable experience for experts.

I started my Post Soviet studies in the mid-1990s and missed roughly two-thirds of the Gorbachev-Yeltsin period, the great transformation plot. Thus, in terms of expertise the generation gap between Zsuzsa and me was much larger than normally. Nine years would not have mattered that much in Brezhnev’s ‘70s. Nine years did not matter in our personal relations: my sister was the same age as Zsuzsa, they attended university at the same time, which has helped me in forming a relatively easygoing collegial friendship with Zsuzsa. Nevertheless, due to those nine years of Soviet transformation I will always remain a latecomer in terms of my research experience, and I knew I would never be able to catch up. She was like a veteran of the last war, while I was only an experienced soldier of a long peace period. Even though she never made me conscious of this, the fact was that we were speaking about a series of events from which I had been mostly absent.

We were different in almost all aspects. For me, Russia was a choice that involved resistance to the dominant trend of EU and Western European studies that prevailed at the time of my studies. Right from the outset I approached Russia as a personal mission, and this was the only way to become an expert of the region in the mid-1990’s. I had a strong, and irresistible appetite for anything Russian, and a unrelenting eagerness to get more of it without too many scientific considerations. For Zsuzsa, by contrast, Russia as a research topic was more like a long-term engagement involving enduring, though not excessive emotions. Once she told me that she had been assigned to this position and came to love it gradually, over time, like an arranged marriage.

Our working methods were also quite different. It took me a long time to be able to withstand the temptation of excessive conceptualization. I always developed theories – occasionally revelatory but often simply false –, about why and how factors are interrelated, what is important and what is not. In most of these discussions she never flat out told me that I am wrong; all she did was to simply refer to facts, statistics and numbers. She

raised some other considerations that militated against my theories. In her typical reserved way, Zsuzsa had the ability to introduce concise but thorough arguments without actually seeming to debate your arguments. This was often a rather painful experience. So, after a while this compelled me to start collecting more data and to justify my statements at these levels. I remember the first time when she asked me to buy the latest edition of the annually book of Customs Statistics during my stay in Moscow. It was a large green book that contained nothing but figures – rather frightening for beginning experts. It took me another five years to understand its significance and to learn how to use it.

Our attitudes towards various kinds of research activities were also different. Zsuzsa always felt a bit intimidated when she had to hold a lecture. She did not like public appearances, tried to avoid these situations and, when they proved unavoidable, she invested a lot of time and energy to prepare for them. When I invited her to some events I organized, she always asked about all the details. Such consultations became our longest telephone conversations. The funniest moments came just after these presentations, when Zsuzsa finally relaxed and let her worries go. At the same time, all the papers I submitted were read and corrected thoroughly and by the deadline. Every detail, every single mistake or unclear points were identified with a request for correction. When she asked me to submit a paper, I always knew that even if this involved a lot of work for me, the paper would meet all editorial standards. The absence of her balanced, critical attitude and her impressive editorial skills are already making themselves felt in the Russia-related publications of the Hungarian academic community.

Over the years two subjects in our strange triangle have changed: Russia and me. Research on Russia, be it economic or political, requires a much more systematic approach than even in the early 2000s. This is not only a matter of the Putin-regime and its relative stability: increased domestic prejudices and perceptions sometimes matter even more. Zsuzsa was always capable to manage these biases and deliver a consistently high standard. She was able to interpret these debates as part of a comprehensive framework and give them a factual basis. And ultimately I think – or maybe I ought to say I hope – I became a bit like Zsuzsa. My early enthusiasm and excess of emotions about Russia and the Post Soviet region naturally mellowed substantially and their place was taken by strict methodological routine, thoroughness and everyday dedication to the task at hand. As I assumed her position at the Institute, I confronted the myriads of administrative tasks and editorial works that need to be performed in order for the Institute to run smoothly. It is almost impossible to comprehend the significance of Zsuzsa's past work without doing it yourself.

In some Central Asian societies the family gathers on the first anniversary of the funeral. It is a time when the bereaved have come to understand that the person they lost is really absent and know why they miss the deceased. It is a sad but also easy task to enumerate what has disappeared from the small community of Hungarian Russia researchers since Zsuzsa passed away: her absence has made itself felt in the quality of Post Soviet

publications and the declining number of small workshops on Russian economic developments. Nevertheless, for me her absence primarily marks a loss of certainty. On many, particularly economy related, issues Zsuzsa's opinion had always been a kind of guarantee for me. I trusted her opinion since it was always proven correct. She knew her limits and she never engaged in speculation. I often called her to check my assumptions or to try to "steal" some new ideas or perspectives for my work. Now I often ask myself: What would Zsuzsa do in this situation?

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